USDA for the greatest good

blue mountains FOREST RESILIENCY PROJECT

BLUE MOUNTAINS RESTORATION STRATEGY| OCTOBER 2016

Refining the Proposed Action... what are we doing now?

Darcy Weseman, Public Affairs (541) 278-3755

Maintaining the health, diversity and productivity of our national forests is important for meeting the needs of present and future generations. We want to manage for resilient landscapes to provide communities with an abundance of natural resources- such as clean water, productive fish and wildlife habitat, quality recreation opportunities, timber and forage, and many other benefits. The Forest Resiliency Project aims to move forests to more resilient conditions by decreasing density of overstocked dry forest areas, while also proposing some limited treatments in moist forests to protect these valuable resources. Treatments considered in this project include commercial harvest, non-commercial thinning and prescribed fire.

With recent team member changes, including the project lead and tribal liaison, the planning team is taking time to better articulate the existing and desired conditions in terms of a resilient landscape. This information will be used to inform a more detailed proposed action, which will be forthcoming. Part of this refinement includes using a Wildfire Risk Assessment to show the risk from wildfire to valuable resources, which can inform treatment design and prioritization (see below).

As the planning team refines the proposed action, they are also working on developing alternatives within the proposed treatment areas based on the comments received during scoping. In addition to the proposed action and the "no action", the team has identified a third alternative. This third alternative will reduce the areas that would be treated mechanically, focusing on removing proposed treatments in the moist forest. More information on these alternatives will be available as they are further developed (see Timeline on page 3).

Wildfire Risk Assessment... quantifying wildfire risk

The planning team is conducting a Wildfire Risk Assessment as part of the Forest Resiliency Project to analyze where treatment design could protect highly valued resources and assets on and adjacent to the Ochoco, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests.

While wildfire is a natural part of forest ecosystems in the Pacific Northwest, high severity fires pose greater threat to human lives, private property, and other highly valued resources and assets on or adjacent to national forest lands. These high value areas include old forest, private lands, riparian areas providing habitats for federally listed fish and municipal watersheds. This does not mean forest managers would automatically treat in these areas. It may be more effective to treat the surrounding landscape to better protect these resources in the face of future wildfire on the landscape.

As an example, municipal watersheds are a highly valued resource and asset the planning team is proposing for protection by treating the

Continued from page 1….

surrounding landscape. The six municipal watersheds on the Ochoco, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests are primary water sources for communities in the Blue Mountains. Each of these watersheds is partially made up of moist forest types, which usually occur at mid elevations and are often the most productive areas due to the amount of available moisture. Moist forest types consist of mixed tree species, such as grand-fir, Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, western larch, lodgepole pine and Engelmann spruce. In many of these areas, dense conifer stands and heavy accumulations of dead and down material have created hazardous fuels conditions. In the event of a wildfire, these conditions are likely to produce a high intensity fire, and adversely impact the local communities' water sources. Hazardous fuel build-up makes these areas unsafe for firefighters to engage in fire suppression efforts.

How do we mitigate this risk? That is what the Forest Resiliency Project is all about- designing treatments to move our public lands from existing to more resilient conditions that can withstand natural disturbances, like wildfire. The Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy team is attempting to accomplish this by moving the dry forests to more resilient landscape forest patterns, while concentrating treatment efforts to minimize wildfire risk in the moist forests.

Being able to quantify the risks posed by high intensity wildfire can help forest managers develop cost-effective mitigation strategies. The Wildfire Risk Assessment serves as an analysis tool, modeling the effects of wildfire management decisions. Using this tool, forest managers will look at what is MOST at risk and WHERE these risks are on the landscape. The risk assessment analyzes the likelihood of wildfires occurring, the intensity at which they may occur, and the impacts that wildfires have on pre-identified highly valued resources and assets. The results of the assessment tell us the effectiveness of various treatments in lowering the risk to these resources and assets. This information will help decision-makers prioritize future treatments in both the dry forests and moist forests.

This tool can also tell us the areas where wildfire could enhance or benefit highly valued resources and assets. For example, some plants such as quaking aspen use fire to reproduce by sending up new sprouts from the below ground root system. Fire can also reduce the canopy cover in an area, giving quaking aspen more opportunity to grow.

Essentially, the wildfire risk assessment shows us the likely exposure and effect of wildfire on highly valued resources and assets, both adverse and beneficial, and can be used as a basis to evaluate the effectiveness of different treatment alternatives. A goal of the Forest Resiliency Project is to support safe and effective fire management- across *all* forest types. The team can use the results of the risk assessment to design and develop strategically placed fuel treatments in the moist forests with the objective of modifying fire behavior potential, improve firefighting opportunities, increase decision space on where and how wildfire can be contained for firefighter and public safety, and protect high values at risk.

Meeting National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 Compliance…
a different strategy

Typically, the US Forest Service meets their obligation for protection of cultural resources during the project planning process and prior to project-level decisions. For the Forest Resiliency Project, we wanted to explore a different, potentially more efficient and effective way of protecting these resources. We are attempting to do this through the use of a programmatic agreement between the Forests and State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), with input and consultation with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation, and the Nez Perce Tribe.

The programmatic agreement sets up a "phased approach" to compliance, whereby the Forest Service commits to work prior to implementation of any projects, rather than prior to decision. This requires

Continued from page 2...

consultation with SHPO and the affected tribes during the planning process, as well as developing updated cultural resource overviews and inventory strategies that will address data gaps in archaeological information. This information will be used to develop, test, and refine models that predict the presence or absence of historic properties, evaluate the effects of broad scale restoration activities on the properties, and improve design criteria to protect historic values – a different approach to identifying and protecting cultural resources.

The three national forests are working with the Tribes that have ceded lands within the Forest Resiliency Project boundaries to collect cultural resources data. This data will inform the phase 1 commitment to update cultural resource overviews, as well as to ensure we are meeting our Tribal Trust Responsibilities. We are also having discussions with each Tribe regarding the potential to conduct traditional use studies for the areas of the Blue Mountain Forest Resiliency Project of interest. These products will add essential knowledge regarding cultural resources values, management options and traditional lifeways within the footprint of the Forest Resiliency Project.

The Forest Resiliency Project Heritage Resource Implementation Plan will tier to guidance informed by the phased approach to then lay out the work that is needed prior to implementation of any project under the Forest Resiliency Project decision(s).

What is resiliency?

The Forest Service defines a resilient ecosystem as one that has a "greater capacity to survive disturbances and large-scale threats, especially under changing and uncertain future environmental conditions, such as those driven by climate change and human uses," (Forest Service Manual 2020). Resiliency is essentially the capacity of a landscape or ecosystem to maintain its basic structure, function, and organization in the face of disturbances, both common and rare" (Stine et al., 2014).

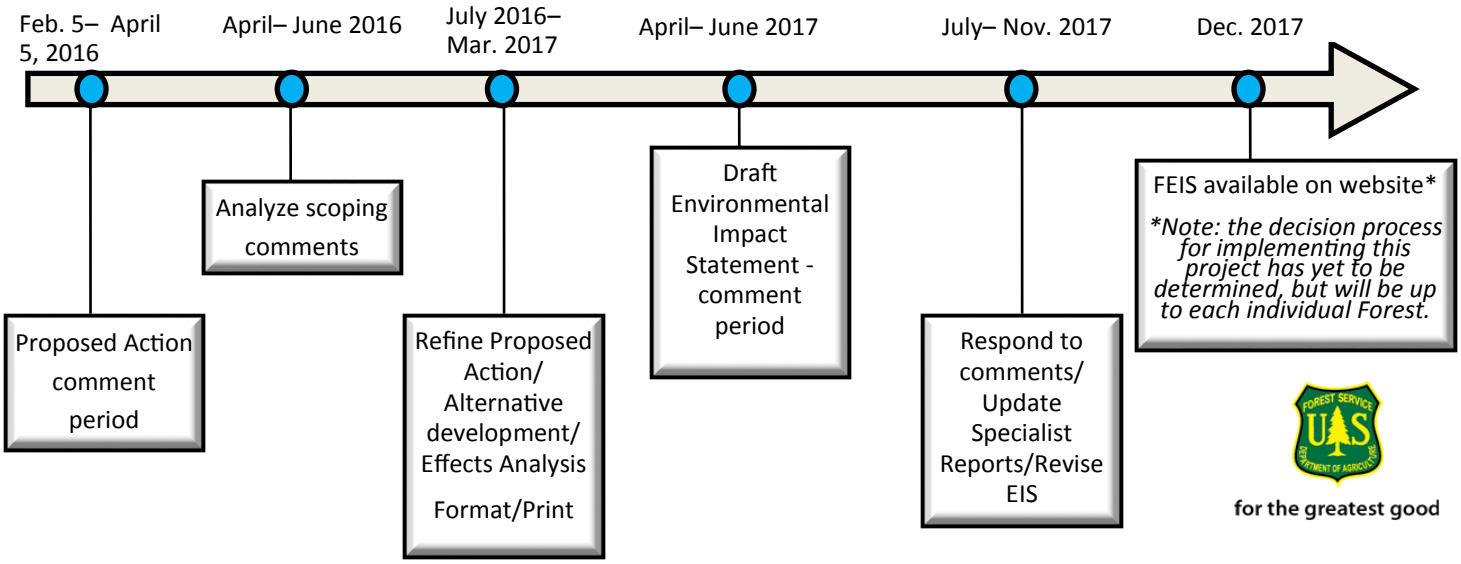
Featured ... frequently asked question

Q. What is the difference between dry forest treatments and strategic fuel treatments?

A. The Forest Resiliency Project essentially has two objectives: to move dry forests to more resilient landscape forest patterns, while concentrating treatment efforts in limited areas of moist forests to reduce wildfire risk (and therefore increasing public and firefighter safety). The dry forest treatments have a restoration objective, where as the strategic fuel treatments are designed to modify fire behavior at strategic locations to provide fire managers with more options to manage inevitable wildfires – protecting high value assets like private land and public and private structures, and setting up the landscape to accept fire.

Read additional FAQs: **http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/bluemountainsforestresiliency/publicengagement**

Restoring Resiliency... the path forward



Restoring Resiliency...
in this issue

Engaging You!

We are always looking for meaningful and innovative ways to engage you in our project. We are exploring a few ideas, such as a public conference call to cut down on travel costs, or public workshops outside of the traditional NEPA model (which usually involves public meetings only during a formal comment period).

Do you have ideas for other ways we can further engage your community members on this project?

Send your ideas to Darcy Weseman, deweseman@fs.fed.us or 72510 Coyote Rd., Pendleton, OR 97801

Check out the Forest Resiliency Blog!

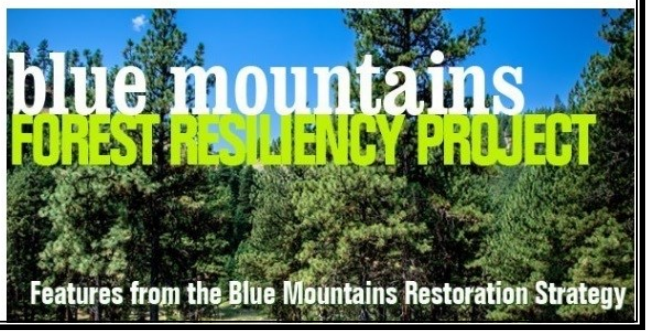
Brought to you by Sustainable Northwest & the U.S. Forest Service

http://www.sustainablenorthwest.org/what-we-do/success-stories/features-from-the-blue-mountains-restoration-strategy

PROJECTS AND STORIES

Features from the Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy, which includes

A series of twelve articles that highlight the environmental and economic challenges and opportunities present in the Blue Mountains region, with updates from the Blue Mountains Forest Resiliency Project.



Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy
72510 Coyote Rd.
Pendleton, OR 97801

for the greatest good